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AUTHOR Crump, Charla A.
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ABSTRACT

Television violence and the impact it has on children is a growing concern in the world today. Although research indicates that violence on television triggers aggressive behavior in children, the characteristics of those children also need to be examined. Factors such as age, intellectual level, identification with television personalities, the total amount of television watched, and the belief that television is realistic affect the influences of television violence on behavior. Intervention techniques such as child and parent training have proven successful in diminishing the negative of television violence. (Contains 30 references.) (Author/RS)

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Running Head: TELEVISION AND BEHAVIOR

Television Violence and Behavior: The Effects of Television Violence on Children

Charla A. Crump

West Texas A&M University

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Charla A. Crump received a B.S. from West Texas State University in Speech Communication and Theatre Arts in 1987. She is currently a graduate student and a Professor of Speech Communication and Theatre Arts at Clarendon College.

Mailing address: P. O. Box 644, Clarendon, TX 79226
Telephone: (806) 874-5360

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Abstract

Television violence and the impact it has on children is a growing concern in the world today. Although research indicates that violence on television triggers aggressive behavior in children, the characteristics of those children also need to be examined. Factors such as age, intellectual level, identification with television personalities, the total amount of television watched, and the belief that television is realistic effects the influences of television violence on behavior.

Television Violence and Behavior:
The Effects of Television Violence on Children

The overall pattern of research findings indicates a positive association between television violence and aggressive behavior. Television violence is one of the things that may lead to aggressive, antisocial, or criminal behavior (Smith, 1993). Several characteristics of viewers have been shown to effect the influence of television violence on behavior. Aggressive behavior is related to the total amount of television watched, not only to the amount of violent television watched (Smith, 1993). Other factors such as age, identification with television personalities, and intellectual achievement influence the effect of television violence on behavior. A critical factor is the extent to which television is perceived as real or make-believe (Feshbach, 1983). This study will help isolate the characteristics of children whose aggressive behavior is triggered by television violence.

The public is enormously interested in the effects of television on children (Neuman, 1984; Phillips, 1986; Rosenthal, 1986). By the time children graduate

from high school, they have spent more time viewing television than any other activity with the exception of sleep (Christo, 1988). Therefore, there is a need to examine the negative impacts of television, and to find the common characteristics of the children who are effected negatively by television.

History of Research

The first congressional hearing on television programming took place in 1952, when the House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce investigated television entertainment to ascertain if it was excessively violent and sexually provocative and if it had pernicious effects (National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], 1982). Violence in the media has increased since 1952 and continues to increase (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1984).

During the period from 1952 to 1967, analyses of programs found a great deal of violence on them. One analysis in 1954 reported an average of eleven threats or acts of violence per hour (Pearl, 1984). Later analysis confirmed that violence on television was increasing and that it was increasing more rapidly on

programs with large numbers of children viewers (NIMH, 1982).

The initial research efforts of numerous investigators led to the Surgeon General's research program on television and social behavior in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Surgeon General's conclusion that television violence does have an adverse effect on certain members of our society stimulated a torrent of research, congressional hearings, and expressions of public concern (Huesmann & Malamuth, 1986).

The late 1970s and early 1980s also saw the emergence of cable television and the video cassette as major media forces. Many teenagers and even preadolescents became frequent viewers of scenes that graphically couple sex and violence (Huesmann & Malamuth, 1986). A new research focus developed on the effects of such media stimuli.

In 1982, the National Institute of Mental Health commissioned a comprehensive review of the recent scientific literature on television and social behavior as a 10-year follow-up to the Surgeon General's report. This study indicted television violence in even

stronger terms than did the earlier report. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) 1990 reported that air time for war cartoons increased from 1.5 hours per week in 1982 to 43 hours per week in 1986. In 1980, children's programs featured 18.6 violent acts per hour, that number rose to about 26.4 violent acts each hour (NAEYC, 1990).

Smith (1993) concluded that by the time children leave elementary school, they will have witnessed at least 8,000 murders and more than 100,000 other assorted acts of violence. It seems fair to say that the majority of researchers in the area are now convinced that excessive violence in the media does exist.

Results of Research

Most of the scientific evidence reveals a relationship between television and aggressive behavior. Television violence is one of the things that may lead to aggressive behavior, however, it usually works in conjunction with other factors.

Characteristics of Viewers

Intellectual Achievement.

Children of lower intellectual achievement generally watch more television, watch more violent television, believe violent television reflects real life, and behave more aggressively than children of higher intellectual achievement (Huesmann, 1986). Singer and Singer (1986) found that children who show greater verbal intelligence and greater overall mental abilities watch less television and are less aggressive. Brighter children are less prone to naive imitation of television material and adopt a more discriminating approach to it (Singer & Singer, 1986). Poor intellectual achievement contributes to the association between violence viewing and aggression, but it does not fully account for it.

Age.

A relationship between television violence and aggression has been observed in children as young as three (Singer & Singer, 1986). Longitudinal data suggests that the relationship is much more consistent and substantial for children in middle childhood than at earlier ages (Smith, 1993).

Adults can be affected as well as children. Aggression in early adulthood is related to the amount of violence watched in middle childhood (Eron, Huesmann, Lefkowitz, & Walder, 1972). The great majority of studies have shown that media depictions of violence can have a socially adverse impact on the behavior of young adults and these people are often capable of doing more harm than children (Berkowitz, 1986). Turner, Hesse, and Peterson-Lewis (1986) demonstrated that the level of exposure to television violence in the third grade is associated with increased rates of aggressive behavior when viewers achieve adulthood.

Amount of Television Watched.

Aggressive behavior is related to the total amount of television watched, not only to the amount of violent television watched. Aggressive behavior can be stimulated also by frenetic, hectic programming that creates a high level of arousal in children (Wright & Huston, 1983). Huesman (1986) found that more aggressive children generally watch more television and prefer more violent television.

People who view the greatest amounts of television

have been reported to exhibit the highest levels of perceived reality resulting in high levels of aggression (Elliott & Slater, 1980). As a result of repeated exposure to media violence, people may eventually perceive violence as an effective means of solving personal or social problems, and accept violence as a way of life (Rule & Ferguson, 1986).

Realistic Violence Vs. Fictional Violence

Significant relationships have been found between children's belief that television violence is realistic, their aggressive behavior, and the amount of violence they watch (Huesmann, 1986). According to Atkin (1983), adolescent aggression increased with perceived reality of television violence.

The findings that real violence elicits more arousal than fictitious violence suggest that it is probably processed as a more intensive informational input. Realistic violence may therefore be more likely to occupy the observer's attention, and thus to elicit associated aggression-related thoughts, emotions, and action tendencies (Geen & Thomas, 1986).

For a script to be encoded and maintained through rehearsal, it must be real to the viewer (Huesmann,

1986). A violent action that a child perceives to be totally unrealistic is unlikely to receive the attention necessary to be encoded and maintained. The relationship between violence viewing and aggression is exacerbated for children who believe the violence is representative of real life (Huesmann, Eron, Lefkowitz, & Walder, 1984).

Perceptions of reality are a matter of individual interpretation, and message effects must be measured instead of assuming that certain message cues will make the reality obvious to all viewers (Potter, 1988). Potter (1988) suggested that perceived reality should be treated as an attitude that varies across people rather than as a characteristic of media content.

Identification With Television Watched

Huesmann, Lagerspetz, and Eron (1984) found that identification with a character substantially increases the likelihood that the character's aggressive behavior will be modeled. Aggressive behaviors are likely to be modeled if cues in the portrayal of violence on television resemble those likely to be encountered in real life. Television violence-induced aggression tends to be directed most strongly against those

persons associated in the viewers' mind with the victim of the observed violence (Berkowitz & Geen, 1967). Therefore, if a victim on television has the same name or characteristics as someone towards whom the viewer holds animosity, violence is likely to result.

Interventions

The most obvious place to intervene in order to diminish the effect of television violence would be at the programming level. However, the television networks have never conceded that there is a relation between violence displayed on the screen and the viewer's subsequent aggressive behavior (Chaffee, et al., 1984; Wurtzel & Lometti, 1984a; Wurtzel & Lometti, 1984b).

Since parents in our society bear the major responsibility for the training, education, and socialization of their children, it would be logical for attempts at intervention to start with them. Eron (1986) concluded that if parents could be informed as to the negative effect that the viewing of violence on television can have on their children, and at the same time be taught how to control and shape their children's television habits, that would be a major

contribution.

Much stronger evidence for the weakening of the link between television violence and aggressive behavior as the result of an intervention was through child training. Eron (1986) found that the effect of television violence could be reduced by changing the children's attitudes, both about the influence of television and about the appropriateness of aggressive behavior.

Summary

The overall pattern of research findings indicate a positive association between television violence and aggressive behavior. Theorists generally agree that serious antisocial aggression is determined by multiple factors (Peterson & Peters, 1983). Factors such as intellectual achievements, age, amount of television watched, whether the violence is perceived as real or make-believe, and whether the viewer identifies with the character must converge for aggression to emerge. Intervention techniques such as child and parent training have proven successful in diminishing the negative of television violence.

Hypotheses

Based upon this literature review, I present the following hypotheses:

H^1: Television violence triggers aggressive behavior in children as moderated by the following characteristics: age, intellectual achievement, amount of television viewed, and perceived reality of television.

H^2: The effects of television violence in triggering aggressive behavior in children can be diminished through parent and child training.

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